



Volunteers Drive Hunter Education Program

By Ron Wilson

Since 1979, about 175,000 students have been certified through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's hunter education program. Many of those students have gone on to test their gun safety skills in the field.

CRAIG BIRKLE

Lorne Sterner taught his first hunter education class in 1973, six years before it became a requirement for some to pass a certified course to hunt in North Dakota.

He's been volunteering his time for 38 years, or plenty long enough to watch three daughters, three grandchildren and kids of former students pass through the program successfully.

"I'm a volunteering type of person," the Casselton man said, which is a bit of an understatement. In two years Sterner will become the first volunteer to mark 40 years with the Game and Fish Department's hunter education program. "I plan on sticking around for it."

It's that "sticking around" approach adopted by Sterner and others (44 instructors have been teaching for 30-plus years while 168 have done likewise for 20-plus years) that has made the hunter education program a success.

"Our veteran volunteers are the 'rock' of the hunter education program," said Jon Hanson, Game and Fish Department hunter education coordinator. "They have built up the program to what it is today and we wouldn't be where we are without them. It's their knowledge and experience that is providing us the next steps in improving on an already successful program."

With any volunteer program, however, there is turnover. People move, find other interests or direct their energies elsewhere. Hanson said the Department's goal is to recruit 50 instructors per year, something he came close to doing in two out of the last three years.

"We'll never run out of the need for new instructors as the demand from a growing number of students will always be there," Hanson said. "In Bismarck and Fargo, for example, we are always adding classes or at least trying to."

There are more than 830 active hunter education instructors in North Dakota, and in any given year courses are taught in 125-140 cities across the state. On average, more than 5,000 students per year have graduated from the Department's hunter education program in the last decade. And since 1979 when the course became mandatory, about 175,000 students in total have been certified.

"Think about the service the volunteers provide to their communities and state without any compensation," Hanson said. "Without them,

we don't have a hunter education program. It's as simple as that."

New instructors to the program arrive via a number of avenues. Some took classes with their kids, liked what they experienced and decided to give a class a try, while others were encouraged by former instructors to become instructor themselves. This sort of recommendation pulls some weight, Hanson said.

"When you ask a hunter education graduate who their instructor was, it's not unusual for little or no hesitation before they answer," Hanson said. "They leave an impression with their students, a positive one that they'll remember for many years."

It's likely that more than 5,000 students will graduate from hunter education courses across the state in 2011.



RON WILSON



There are more than 800 active hunter education instructors in North Dakota. Many instructors nowadays teach in teams.

MIKE ANDERSON

Hunter Education Numbers

- 1979 – Year that hunter education became mandatory in North Dakota.
- 175,000 – Number of hunter education graduates since 1979.
- 833 – Number of active hunter education instructors.
- 125-140 – Number of North Dakota cities where hunter education courses are offered.
- 2,465 – Number of students who graduated from hunter education home study courses since 2004.
- 5,000-plus – Number of hunter education graduates in North Dakota per year.

Another prevailing theme among instructors, new or veteran, is that they volunteer their time because of North Dakota's strong hunting heritage. "You hear a lot of people say that they do it because they like to hunt, appreciate the opportunities we have in North Dakota, and want to make sure that their kids and grandkids have the same opportunities in the future."

Most of the instructors teach in teams nowadays, anywhere from 3-10 to a team, Hanson said. They divide duties, divide class times, making it more manageable for people who want to give, but also have responsibilities outside the classroom.

Sterner is involved in the team approach. About 10 years ago he started cutting back his duties. Today, he said he mostly organizes and gets students signed up for the classes. "I'm still enjoying it and getting a lot of help from other instructors," he said.

Hanson said some of his hunter education counterparts in other states have a tough time recruiting volunteers. "While I don't know it for a fact, volunteerism as a whole is not what it was nationwide 10 years ago," he said. "At least it sure feels that way."

To get ahead of a mood of indifference in North Dakota, Hanson said there is talk among staff about getting more youth involved in the program by making assistants out of those graduates younger than 18. "Other states have done this and it's very successful," Hanson said. "One of the goals, of course, is that you hope that one day these assistants will become certified instructors."

While teaching safety is the heart of a 14-hour hunter education course, Hanson said instructors also focus on ethics, laws, regulations and basic wildlife biology. "The course reinforces the importance of safety, but it also touches on important information like wildlife conservation that kids just aren't going to get anywhere else," he said.

If the 10-year average holds true, more than 5,000 students will graduate from hunter education courses across the state this year with the plan, at least for many, of ushering their newly-learned skills into North Dakota's outdoors. If Hanson could send each and every graduate off with one last piece of advice it would be this tidbit gleaned from a counterpart in Kansas: "Load your brain before you load your gun."

"It's a simple, but important message students have heard from their volunteer instructors in one form or another," Hanson said. "I like it because it fits."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

Getting Signed up

To register for a hunter education class, students should access the Game and Fish Department website at gf.nd.gov and click on the education/outreach link and “hunter education.”

Classes are listed by city, and can also be sorted by start date. Click on “enroll” next to the specific class, and follow the simple instructions. Personal information is required.

Jon Hanson, Department hunter education coordinator, said one of the hurdles the hunter education program faces is when people enroll for classes online, but don’t show up for classes.

“If they can’t attend, we’d really like

them to go online and take their name off the list,” Hanson said. “We are experiencing an almost 20 percent no-show in classes, which is unfortunate because we have people waiting to take some classes.”

Those who do not have access to the Internet and want to sign up for a class can call the hunter education program in Bismarck at (701) 328-6615.

The Game and Fish website also provides a free hunter education study guide and a tree stand safety course.

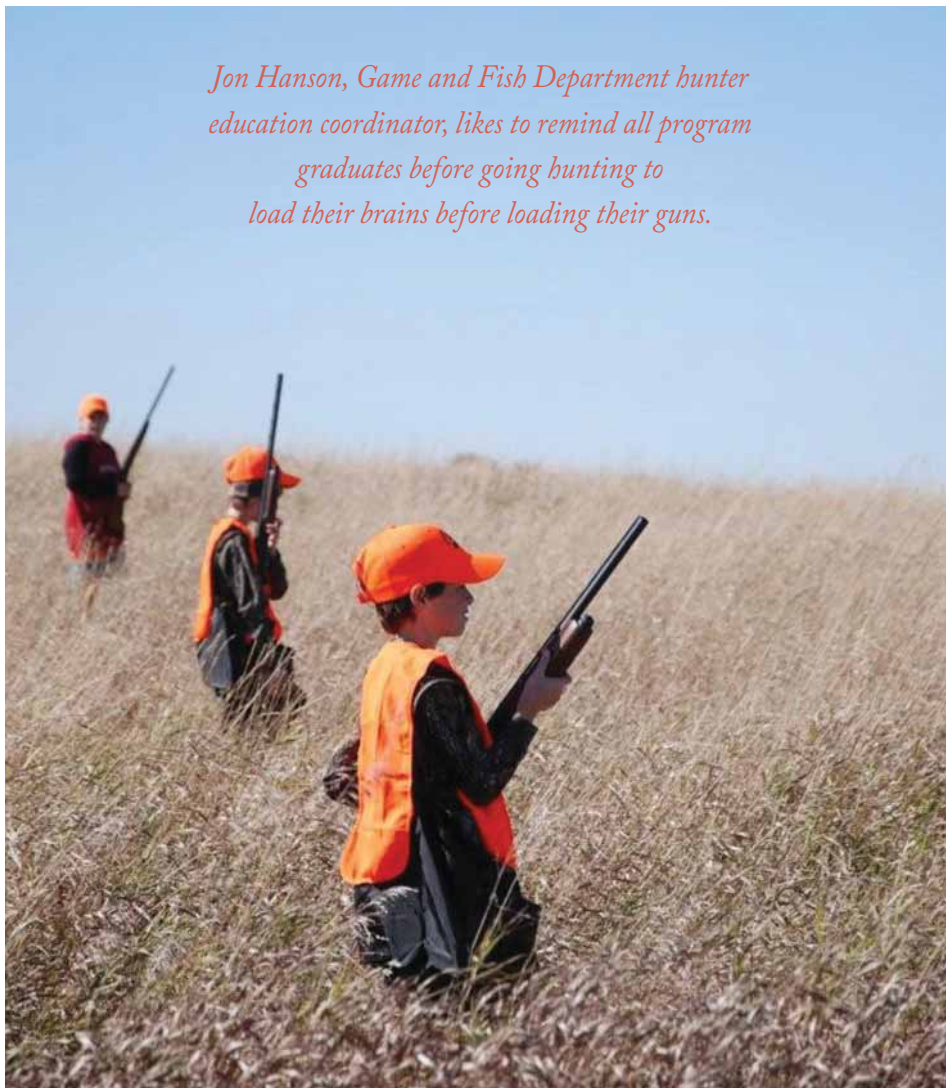
“The free study guide contains all the material students will learn in the course,” Hanson said. “They can use it to study the material while attending class, use it as a

primer for taking the course, or simply use it as a refresher.”

State law requires anyone born after December 31, 1961 to pass a certified hunter education course to hunt in the state. Hunter education is mandatory for youth who are turning 12 years old, and children can take the class at age 11.

Home study courses are offered for students 16 years and older. Home study students must also attend two classes in person to complete the course. Hanson said 2,465 students have completed this course since 2004.

Jon Hanson, Game and Fish Department hunter education coordinator, likes to remind all program graduates before going hunting to load their brains before loading their guns.



GREG GUILLICKSON